

School Closings

Click now to learn about School Closings or Delays.

News

SHARE

PRINT | COMMENTS (32) | EMAIL | LETTER TO EDITOR | SIZE



February 11, 2014

g+1 144

Recommend 8.9k

Tweet 771

'Significant' slurry spill blackens Kanawha creek

100,000 gallons escapes Patriot Coal facility



Kenny Kemp

Emergency officials and environmental inspectors said roughly six miles of Fields Creek was blackened by a coal slurry spill in eastern Kanawha County Tuesday morning.

By Ken Ward Jr.

By David Gutman

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- More than 100,000 gallons of coal slurry poured into an eastern Kanawha County stream Tuesday in what officials were calling a "significant spill" from a Patriot Coal processing facility.

Emergency officials and environmental inspectors said roughly six miles of Fields Creek had been blackened and that a smaller amount of the slurry made it into the Kanawha River near Chesapeake.

"This has had significant, adverse environmental impact to Fields Creek and an unknown amount of impact to the Kanawha River," said Secretary Randy Huffman of the state Department of Environmental Protection. "This is a big deal,



Kenny Kemp

"There has been a significant environmental impact," Harold Ward, acting director of the state Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Mining and Reclamation, said of the spill.

[More media](#)

this is a significant slurry spill."

"When this much coal slurry goes into the stream, it wipes the stream out."

Earlier in the day, Jimmy Gianato, director of the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, said he didn't have a lot of details on the

Get Daily Headlines by E-Mail



Sign Up

Sign up for the latest news delivered to your inbox each morning.

Advertisement - Your ad here

**Win Up To \$28,000
or a chance to win a
Country Concert Package!**

You can turn your
West Virginia Lottery
Mega Millions tickets into
another chance to win!



CLICK HERE FOR COMPLETE DETAILS

**DESTINATION
West Virginia**

Links to great West Virginia getaways!

News Videos

South Prepares for
'Catastrophic' Storm



Most Recent

Accident closes I-64 eastbound at Nitro bridge

Updated: 9:47 am

Area looks to bring in visitors after water crisis

Bill to increase county officials' pay moves forward
9:29 am

Tomblin says he'll appeal FEMA decision on water crisis
help 9:20 am

Second defendant sentenced in Doddridge man's
slaying 8:52 am

SAVE! with Home Delivery

Advertisement - Your ad here



incident but was under the impression it wasn't that serious.

"I don't think there's really anything to it," Gianato said. "It turned out to be much of nothing."

The spill occurred at Patriot Coal's Kanawha Eagle operation.

The spill was caused by a malfunction of a valve inside the slurry line, carrying material from the preparation plant to a separate disposal site, not to an impoundment, according to DEP officials.

The valve broke sometime between 2:30 and 5:30 early Tuesday morning, Huffman said at a news conference Tuesday evening. Patriot Coal did not call the DEP to alert them of the leak until 7:40 Tuesday morning, Huffman said. Companies are required to immediately report any spills to the DEP.

There was an alarm system in place to alert facility operators of the broken valve, but the alarm failed, so pumps continued to send the toxic slurry through the system. There was a secondary containment wall around the valve, but with the pumps continuing to send slurry to the broken valve, it was soon overwhelmed and the slurry overflowed the wall and made its way to the creek.

Huffman said they did not know why the alarm system failed.

"Had the alarms gone off and warned the operator that the pipe was leaking, the shutdown could have been done in time for the secondary containment to contain the material that leaked," Huffman said. "This was a mechanical failure, we're not making any excuses for anybody."

The company turned off the pumps at 5:30, more than two hours before anyone called the DEP, but Huffman said he's not sure if they turned off the pumps because they knew about the spill or for another reason.

Patriot Coal released a statement on the spill Tuesday evening.

"Mine personnel provided notification to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and all pumping related to the slurry line was promptly discontinued and the discharge ceased. Containment activity began immediately at the site and is continuing in Fields Creek and is our top priority," Janine Orf, a Patriot spokeswoman wrote.

For most of the day, the DEP was operating under the assumption that MCHM, the chemical that contaminated the drinking water of 300,000 West Virginians last month, was included in the spilled slurry. Huffman said that they learned late in the day that the facility had stopped using MCHM just a few weeks ago, so a different coal-cleaning chemical was involved.

Huffman said that the new chemical was polypropylene glycol, although he also referred to it as polyethylene glycol. He said that that chemical is such a small part of the slurry that they don't believe it, specifically, will have an impact.

Huffman said they had been testing for MCHM, but will now have to change their testing protocols.

Residents near the spill had complained of MCHM's telltale licorice odor, but Huffman said that the odor was from a tank of MCHM that the company was moving off site.

Oddly, in Patriot's statement the company mentioned testing for MCHM in Fields Creek.

"Recent testing initiated by the Kanawha Eagle mining complex confirmed that the level of MCHM is far below the 1 part per million screening level set by the Centers for Disease Control and in most instances was non-detectable," Orf wrote. "We will continue to work with the Department of Environmental Protection regarding the containment and cleanup activities."

Top Stories

- Study to test home plumbing for MCHM
- Tomblin says he'll appeal FEMA decision on water crisis help
- Minimum-wage hike up for vote in W.Va. House
- Ex-Mingo magistrate arrested for allegedly selling cocaine
- Bill to increase county officials' pay moves forward

Advertisement - Your ad here

Huffman said that they are using booms, vacuum trucks and settling ponds to try to contain the spill.

Coal slurry contains a variety of substances that are likely more toxic than Crude MCHM or polyethylene glycol. It contains heavy metals, like iron, manganese, aluminum and selenium.

By calculating the rate of the pump and the time it ran, DEP officials estimate a maximum of 108,000 gallons of slurry spilled into Fields Creek. They do not know how much made it into the Kanawha, but Huffman said the slurry was visible in the river for about a half-mile before it began to dissipate.

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- More than 100,000 gallons of coal slurry poured into an eastern Kanawha County stream Tuesday in what officials were calling a "significant spill" from a Patriot Coal processing facility.

Emergency officials and environmental inspectors said roughly six miles of Fields Creek had been blackened and that a smaller amount of the slurry made it into the Kanawha River near Chesapeake.

"This has had significant, adverse environmental impact to Fields Creek and an unknown amount of impact to the Kanawha River," said Secretary Randy Huffman of the state Department of Environmental Protection. "This is a big deal, this is a significant slurry spill."

"When this much coal slurry goes into the stream, it wipes the stream out."

Earlier in the day, Jimmy Gianato, director of the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, said he didn't have a lot of details on the incident but was under the impression it wasn't that serious.

"I don't think there's really anything to it," Gianato said. "It turned out to be much of nothing."

The spill occurred at Patriot Coal's Kanawha Eagle operation.

The spill was caused by a malfunction of a valve inside the slurry line, carrying material from the preparation plant to a separate disposal site, not to an impoundment, according to DEP officials.

The valve broke sometime between 2:30 and 5:30 early Tuesday morning, Huffman said at a news conference Tuesday evening. Patriot Coal did not call the DEP to alert them of the leak until 7:40 Tuesday morning, Huffman said. Companies are required to immediately report any spills to the DEP.

There was an alarm system in place to alert facility operators of the broken valve, but the alarm failed, so pumps continued to send the toxic slurry through the system. There was a secondary containment wall around the valve, but with the pumps continuing to send slurry to the broken valve, it was soon overwhelmed and the slurry overflowed the wall and made its way to the creek.

Huffman said they did not know why the alarm system failed.

"Had the alarms gone off and warned the operator that the pipe was leaking, the shutdown could have been done in time for the secondary containment to contain the material that leaked," Huffman said. "This was a mechanical failure, we're not making any excuses for anybody."

The company turned off the pumps at 5:30, more than two hours before anyone called the DEP, but Huffman said he's not sure if they turned off the pumps because they knew about the spill or for another reason.

Patriot Coal released a statement on the spill Tuesday evening.

"Mine personnel provided notification to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and all pumping related to the slurry line was promptly discontinued and the discharge ceased. Containment activity began immediately at the site and is continuing in Fields Creek and is our top priority," Janine Orf, a Patriot spokeswoman wrote.

For most of the day, the DEP was operating under the assumption that MCHM, the chemical that

<http://www>

contaminated the drinking water of 300,000 West Virginians last month, was included in the spilled slurry. Huffman said that they learned late in the day that the facility had stopped using MCHM just a few weeks ago, so a different coal-cleaning chemical was involved.

Huffman said that the new chemical was polypropylene glycol, although he also referred to it as polyethylene glycol. He said that that chemical is such a small part of the slurry that they don't believe it, specifically, will have an impact.

Huffman said they had been testing for MCHM, but will now have to change their testing protocols.

Residents near the spill had complained of MCHM's telltale licorice odor, but Huffman said that the odor was from a tank of MCHM that the company was moving off site.

Oddly, in Patriot's statement the company mentioned testing for MCHM in Fields Creek.

"Recent testing initiated by the Kanawha Eagle mining complex confirmed that the level of MCHM is far below the 1 part per million screening level set by the Centers for Disease Control and in most instances was non-detectable," Orf wrote. "We will continue to work with the Department of Environmental Protection regarding the containment and cleanup activities."

Huffman said that they are using booms, vacuum trucks and settling ponds to try to contain the spill.

Coal slurry contains a variety of substances that are likely more toxic than Crude MCHM or polyethylene glycol. It contains heavy metals, like iron, manganese, aluminum and selenium.

By calculating the rate of the pump and the time it ran, DEP officials estimate a maximum of 108,000 gallons of slurry spilled into Fields Creek. They do not know how much made it into the Kanawha, but Huffman said the slurry was visible in the river for about a half-mile before it began to dissipate.

There are no water intakes directly downstream from where the spill took place.

Laura Jordan, a spokeswoman for West Virginia American Water, issued a statement to reassure the public the slurry spill would not impact the company's regional drinking water plant in Charleston -- which is located about a mile upstream from where the Elk River empties into the Kanawha.

"We have been in contact with the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, which concurs that they do not anticipate any impact to our plant on the Elk River," Jordan said.

This is at least the third incident slurry incident since 2010 at the Kanawha Eagle cite. In late November, black water was discharged into South Hollow Stream, and ended up in Fields Creek. The company was fined \$663.

In October of 2010, there was a slurry line break that discharged into Spicelick and Joes Creek, impacting about 3 miles of stream. The company was fined \$22,400.

On Tuesday, Huffman said fines alone were not enough of a deterrent to prevent spills.

"A some point companies will just pay. We have to do more than that, we can't just send them a bill and say you have to pay this to continue operating, there have to be fundamental changes made at a facility that's had multiple incidents," Huffman said. "Maybe there needs to be a top down review of all their processes. Maybe there's a cultural change within that company that needs to take place that has more of an emphasis on safety, environmental controls, things like that."

He mentioned increasing the size of secondary containment and requiring alarms to be certified as possible steps to be taken.

Coalfield citizens have for years complained about blackwater spills and worried about the dangers of coal-slurry impoundments and the potential consequences of injecting coal slurry underground.

A little more than four years ago, the U.S. Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement issued a report cautioning the DEP was not taking strong enough enforcement actions to cut down

<http://wv>

on blackwater spills from mining operations.

"The team found that existing policies and procedures are not effective in reducing or preventing blackwater spills," said the OSM report, issued in October 2009.

DEP officials rejected the OSM's suggestion the DEP re-examine its rules and policies on blackwater spills, arguing the incidents were on the decline.

"The violation rate for blackwater spills is going down," Tom Clarke, then the DEP's mining director, said at the time. "The figures show it's a declining problem."

After a series of blackwater spills from 2001 to 2003, OSM had launched a review of how well the DEP was policing such incidents.

Among other things, the 2009 OSM report found it hard, using DEP inspection reports and databases, to definitively quantify the number of blackwater spills. When spills occur, state inspectors cite companies for violating different regulations, and inspection narratives don't always explain clearly what happened, OSM said.

The lack of clear data may lead some operators to face less-serious enforcement action than they should and may hurt the DEP's ability to cite companies for a "pattern of violation," which can lead to operations being shut down and operators being blocked from receiving new permits.

OSM investigators also found that other strategies -- including settlement agreements with mine operators and federal criminal prosecution -- don't always work in stopping future blackwater spills.

"It appears that the consequences for violating the law, even when the violations are intentional, willful and blatant, are not significant enough to be a deterrent," the OSM report said.

Reach Ken Ward Jr. at kw...@wvgazette.com or 304-348-1702.

Reach David Gutman at david.gut...@wvgazette.com or 304-348-5119.

http://wv

More Articles in News

1 | 2 | [Next Page »](#)

From around the Web



STOP Posting These Pics



FEMA Fears This....



Clever Joint Solution



Weird Rule in Colorado:



Models Sans Swimsuits!



Probiotics - Warning



New Policy in Colorado



Is It Time to Retire ?

ADVERTISEMENT

Recommended For You

Photos show 'the other West Virginia'

Oral sex accusation part of conspiracy, Logan man says

Charleston man charged with fathering three grandchildren

Police arrest Charleston firefighter at gunpoint

Man gets 2-10 years for soliciting baby-sitter sex

From Around the Web

Six Feet Under: Nonnormative Burial Options ([Learnist](#))

High-tech food digester keeps thousands of pounds of waste out of landfill ([Mother Nature Network](#))

Pearl Jam's commitment to the environment includes fan merchandise ([Mother Nature Network](#))

Aquino hails Elsie Gaches Village ([Inquirer.net](#))